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SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: THAILAND: FORMER PRESIDENTS BUSH AND CLINTON
MEETING WITH PRIME MINISTER THAKSIN

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: In a February 19 meeting, Prime Minister Thaksin thanked former Presidents Bush and Clinton for U.S. assistance following the disaster, and highlighted the excellent cooperation between the U.S. and Thai militaries. Thaksin discussed Thai recovery efforts and plans for the affected regions, and pushed for a Bangkok based tsunami early warning system (EWS). The leaders discussed Thaksin's recent reelection and Thailand's HIV/AIDS drugs program. END SUMMARY

2. (SBU) Former Presidents Bush and Clinton met Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra for a discussion and dinner meeting on February 19, following the former Presidents' tour of tsunami affected areas. Presidents Bush and Clinton were accompanied by Ambassador Boyce; Ambassador Douglas Hartwick; and Laura Graham, Chief of Staff to former President Clinton. Prime Minister Thaksin was accompanied by Foreign Minister Surakiart Sathirathai, Interior Minister Bhokhin Phonlakun, and Natural Resources and Environment Minister Suwit Khunkitti.

THANKS BETWEEN FRIENDS

3. (SBU) Presidents Bush and Clinton expressed sympathy to the Prime Minister and the Thai people for the devastation of the western coast of Thailand and for the great loss of life from the December 26, 2004 tsunami. Prime Minister Thaksin thanked the two presidents for the strong and immediate U.S. response, and the assistance provided by both the USG and the American people. Thaksin said that the Thai people were deeply touched that President Bush and former Presidents Bush and Clinton had all personally visited the Thai Embassy in Washington to sign the book of condolences.

4. (SBU) The former Presidents expressed appreciation for the excellent cooperation by the Royal Thai Government (RTG) and the Thai military in supporting regional U.S. humanitarian relief efforts, particularly the use of the Thai military facility at Utapao. The Presidents praised the excellent working relations between the U.S. and Thai militaries that had made our collective relief response possible in the immediate aftermath of the disaster. Foreign Minister Surakiart added that USAID had also been very helpful in the relief effort.

RECOVERY: A TOUGH JOB, BUT MOVING FORWARD

5. (SBU) Presidents Bush and Clinton commented on the scenes of destruction that they had seen during their tour of the impacted provinces, remarking that they had been deeply affected by the destruction. They noted, however, that they were equally impressed by the extent of the clean up, and the energy and vitality of the Thai people who were busy putting the region back together. Prime Minister Thaksin said that the RTG had worked hard in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami, with some 6,000 military personnel contributing to

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relief efforts. Thaksin noted that the RTG had evacuated some 5,000 foreign tourists within 2 days of the disaster, and had paid the medical bills of tourists injured by the tsunami. Foreign Minister Surakiart explained that the Prime

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Minister had been directly involved in relief and recovery efforts from the beginning, noting that Thaksin had traveled to Phuket every two days during the immediate crisis to personally take charge of recovery efforts.

6. (SBU) Thaksin optimistically estimated that most affected areas would be largely recovered by the end of the year, but noted that Phi Phi Island, which had been devastated, would take longer to recover. The Prime Minister said the RTG had begun a large-scale housing program that would eventually produce some 50,000 homes for displaced persons.

7. (SBU) While recovery efforts are moving ahead, the Prime Minister said the RTG was seeking additional cooperation and assistance both from foreign governments and from the private sector. Thaksin proudly noted that Thailand had not asked

for, or received cash assistance, but said they did need specialized technical assistance. He said that environmental recovery efforts were of particular concern, and would require additional expertise. Thaksin also highlighted how important the tourism industry is for Thailand's economy. He said that Thailand needed to get the message out to potential tourists that they are welcome and that hotels are ready to receive them.

EARLY WARNING DIPLOMACY

18. (SBU) The former Presidents asked the Prime Minister about the proposed regional tsunami early warning system. Thaksin said that Thailand had hosted a meeting January 28-29 meeting in Phuket with representatives of all concerned countries, including the U.S. Thaksin said that the meeting had produced agreement that all countries needed to be linked, however, they were unable to reach consensus on Thailand's proposal that Bangkok be the site of the proposed early warning center. Thaksin said that regardless of the final decision on the location of the regional center, Thailand would develop its own early warning system, which he hoped to have in place by the end of April 2005. Thaksin also noted that ASEAN member countries had agreed to establish a "standby" agreement to pool information about resources so that in future disasters response times would be drastically reduced.

HIV/AIDS PROGRAMS IN THAILAND

19. (SBU) Prime Minister Thaksin asked former President Clinton about his work on HIV/AIDS, and the possibility that Thai firms could become involved in efforts to produce inexpensive anti-retroviral drugs for AIDS victims. President Clinton stated that he was very interested in expanding HIV/AIDS drug availability, noting that his AIDS Foundation was having some modest success in providing affordable drugs to victims. President Clinton said the key to expanding drug coverage was ensuring that local authorities establish a medically credible system to provide the drugs to patients in a regulated manner. Thaksin claimed that Thai pharmaceutical companies could produce anti-retroviral drugs more cheaply than other countries, including India. President Clinton promised to explore having his foundation purchase drugs from Thai firms.

THAKSIN'S REELECTION

10. (SBU) Presidents Bush and Clinton congratulated the Prime Minister on his convincing victory during the February 6 national elections. President Clinton praised Thaksin for his effective leadership and for being a strong friend of the U.S. Thaksin thanked the Presidents for their sentiments, and agreed that the Thai people had given his Thai Rak Thai party a powerful mandate by giving them 378 of the 500 seats in Parliament, a historic number in Thailand's modern democratic history. Ambassador Boyce noted that this was the first time that a Prime Minister enjoyed a full majority.

11. (SBU) Former Presidents Bush and Clinton did not have the opportunity to clear this cable.
BOYCE